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ABSTRACT

The Middle College High School, an experimental school at La Guardia Community College (New York) which incorporates the last three years of high school and the first two years of college, was designed for adolescents of average ability but deficient computational and communication skills. Remediation was viewed as a social as well as instructional process; the remedial strategy involved academic and personal counseling and basic skills instruction in a small, personal setting. This study was designed to isolate and analyze the remedial aspects of the program's social structure and functions. Participant observation data were collected over a three-semester period, focusing on instructional methods and content, motivating devices and failure management techniques, counseling patterns, discipline management, and interface between the Middle College and the college. Interviews were also conducted with staff and samples of students. The data indicated that the strongest component of the program was its small size and that the college environment facilitated student motivation, but that the counseling component fell somewhat short of its potential due to teacher/counselor uncertainty over non-traditional role expectations. The overall impact of basic skills instruction was found to rank behind that of size, setting, and counseling. (JDS)

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FACTORS IN REMEDIAL EDUCATION:

THE CASE STUDY OF AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

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I Background: The Problem and the Setting

The advent of open admissions in higher education has made the problem of effective remedial education for disadvantaged youths more urgent than ever. Although a large variety of approaches - ranging from reforming curriculum content and instructional methods to radically restructuring the schools - have been tried, no consensus on solutions has emerged.

In the area of curriculum, several writers emphasize the need for significant change in order to make education relevant to the needs of youths alienated by traditional approaches. Fantini and Weinstein, for example, recommend a curriculum that explores the immediate realities of poverty and racism and is experience-based rather than symbol-based.[1] In this connection, Webster points out "the crying need to make the curriculum both valid and accurate as to the past history and present status of ethnic minorities in this country."[2] Grambs suggests that teachers and children create their own reality-based folk tales.[3] With regard to instructional methods, such writers as Gotkin and Cross emphasize the need for new methods which include,

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[1]Mario Fantini and Gerald Weinstein, The Disadvantaged: Challenge to Education, New York, Harper & Row, 1968, p. 337-375.

[2]Staten W. Webster, "The Crucible of the Urban Classroom," in Sterling M. McMurrin, ed., The Conditions for Educational Equality, New York, Committee for Economic Development, 1971, p. 100.

[3]Jean Dresden Grambs, "Instructional Materials for the Disadvantaged Child," in A. Harry Passow, ed., Reaching the Disadvantaged Learner, New York, Teachers College Press, 1970, p. 165-183.

among others, programmed instruction,[4] individualized instruction,[5] and the development of skill centers.[6] Still others, however, advocate a closer look at the structure of the schools. Thomas, for example, summarizes the demands for alternative schools which ideally would do away with academic and disciplinary requirements, allow greater freedom of choice for students, and maximize the role of students in shaping their own education.[7] Doll and Levine, disagreeing with much of the accepted wisdom about educating the disadvantaged, state that "there is reason to believe that better education for the disadvantaged student is dependent on providing a relatively large amount of structure in his educational experience."[8]

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[4] Lassar G. Gotkin, "Programmed Instruction as a Strategy for Developing Curricula for Disadvantaged Children," in Passow, op. cit., p. 83-109.

[5] K. Patricia Cross, Beyond the Open Door: New Students to Higher Education, San Francisco, Gossey-Bass, 1971.

[6] S. Alan Cohen, "Increasing Reading Achievement among the Disadvantaged," in Passow, ed, op. cit., p. 131-151.

[7] Donald R. Thomas, The Schools Next Time, New York, McGraw Hill, 1973, p. 142-169. Boocock, on the other hand, reminds us that the impact of "free schools" on cognitive learning (as opposed to personality development) is yet to be demonstrated. See Sarane Spence Boocock, An Introduction to the Sociology of Learning, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1972, p. 150.

[8] Russell C. Doll and David U. Levine, "Toward a Definition of 'Structure' in the Education of Disadvantaged Students," in A. Harry Passow, ed., Opening Opportunities for Disadvantaged Learners, New York, Teachers College Press, 1972, p.131.

It is clear then, that no simple solutions to the problems of educating the disadvantaged have emerged. New York City, where the start of open admissions in the City University had made the problem particularly acute, has attempted a variety of different approaches. The following paper discusses our field research experiences with one such experiment, Middle College High School, an alternative school co-sponsored by the New York City Board of Education and the New York City Board of Higher Education.[9] These authorities have joined in this venture in order to provide remedial help to underachieving youngsters before they reach the City University as freshmen, and to learn more about the factors involved in remedial education in general. As an experiment, Middle College viewed remediation as much as a social process as a matter of basic skills instruction. During the first year of the program it was our task as field workers to isolate and analyze the remedial aspects of the program's social structure and functions. After a brief sketch of the program, we will describe our methods and findings, and discuss some analytic issues.

Middle College was designed as a 5-year program combining the last three years of high school with the first two years of college and leading to an A.A. degree. It sought to recruit junior high school students of average ability but deficient in basic computational and communication skills. In other words, the target population consisted of students who might drop out before completing high school or, if

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[9] This research project was funded in part by a grant from the Fund on Post Secondary Education. The authors wish to acknowledge Janet Lieberman of LaGuardia Community College for her assistance in

they reached the City University through the open admissions program, might be inadequately prepared for college work. The student body was racially mixed and came primarily from working class and lower middle class families in western Queens. The program was designed to be small (125 students during the first year) and was located at the City University of New York's LaGuardia Community College.

With a view that remediation is, to a significant degree, a psycho-social process, planners saw Middle College's remedial efforts as a function of several program components: small size, geared to offer students individualized attention; location on a college campus, designed to spur interest in and motivation for further education; academic and personal counseling, aimed especially at helping students to develop the affective skills of decision-making, goal-oriented behavior, cooperation, and leadership; and basic skills instruction itself, designed to develop the cognitive aspects of communication and computational skills.[10]

Each of the remedial components was associated with an innovative structure, role or function. Middle College's small size and college

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obtaining the grant, Martin Moed, LaGuardia's Dean of Faculty, and Dan Ehrlich and Kenneth Berger of LaGuardia's Office of Institutional Research for their suggestions during the course of the project.

10 In addition, career education was to be a major component of the program. Since the latter was more a long-term goal and did not get fully organized during the first year, however, our analysis did not focus on it.

campus location were features of the program's innovative structure. The decision to associate responsibility for counseling with the position of teacher-counselor was an example of an innovative staff role. The designation of the "House" - a daily period set aside for student-initiated group projects, programs or activities (formally or informally organized) as the central unit of student association with the program - was another structural innovation.

II The Research Process

The Middle College's broad, nontraditional view of the remedial process suggested a field research design capable of monitoring the program's multifaceted approach. The diagram below illustrates the Middle College's remedial strategy and the research plan for analyzing it through participant observation.

MIDDLE COLLEGE REMEDIAL APPROACH
AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION RESEARCH STRATEGY

Program Component	Aim	Observation Focus
Size and Setting	Motivation Individualized Instruction	Participant Interaction Teacher-Student Student-Student College Student-M.C. Student
Counseling (Academic & Personal)	Interpersonal and Affective Skills Decision-making Cooperation Leadership Goal-Oriented Behavior	"House": Teacher-Counselor Role Class Activities
Basic Skills Instruction	Communication and Computational Skills	Instructional Methods Rewards & Incentives Discipline

As the diagram suggests, observers focussed primarily on the program's structure, roles, and functions associated with the various remedial aims. To assess the impact of Middle College's size and setting on the remedial process, for example, observers studied interaction between teacher-counselors and students, among Middle College students, and between College students and Middle College students. Observers placed analytic significance on the nature of interaction and, perhaps more importantly, on its observable influence on students' motivation and learning. In order to analyze the counseling component, particularly its influence on the development of psycho-social skills, researchers examined primarily the program's "house" structure and the teacher-counselor role. Finally, in order to analyze the basic skills instructional component, observers studied classroom activity, particularly such aspects as the relative effectiveness of various instructional methods, materials and incentives.

In addition to enabling us to examine the subtle, often difficult to measure, day-to-day aspects of the program's multifaceted approach to remediation, the participant observation method offered another advantage. Unlike traditional evaluation, which tends to be summative and hence often unable to effect changes in the program during its operational phase, participant observation offered the opportunity to

give faculty intermittent feedback on the program's progress. This feedback could be used to assess interim progress and to make appropriate changes.[11] The participant observation method also seemed potentially useful for developing empirically based guidelines for possible replication of the Middle College experiment. By supplying qualitative data on the effectiveness of teaching and discipline methods and on the relative success of different incentives and rewards, participant observation could be used to help interpret the results of administered tests and to isolate the factors contributing to those results. Finally, the use of field work in association with survey and testing techniques represented to us a step towards the integration of research design, which, as Sieber pointed out, may significantly advance sociological and educational research.[12]

During the program's three academic quarters, two half-time participant observers observed and recorded over 400 Middle College activities. Their roles were primarily ones of observers, but in addition they conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with program participants. They shared their observations with the staff at regular meetings or at conferences.

The study, conducted between September, 1974 and June, 1975, had three phases: development, focused research, and data analysis.

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[11] For the merits of "formative" vs. "summative" evaluation, see Michael Scriven, "The Methodology of Evaluation," in Carol H. Weiss, Evaluating Action Programs, Boston, Allyn & Bacon, 1973, p. 123-136.

[12] Sam Sieber, "Integrating Fieldwork and Survey Methods," American Journal of Sociology 78, May, 1973, p. 1335-1360.

Intensive observation was going on during all three phases. The first phase lasted from September to December, 1974. During this period, the researchers analyzed the findings of student and staff interviews conducted in May, 1974, during the program's recruitment phase. These preliminary interviews were designed primarily to gauge participants' initial attitudes and expectations, so that they could be compared with a similar series of interviews conducted towards the end of the year. The analysis of the preliminary interviews was also used to suggest hypotheses and highlight issues for further research.[13]

During the first phase, observers also conducted intensive field work for the purpose of developing categories and analyzing the program's structure and process. Following in part the grounded theory approach recommended by Glaser and Strauss, observers used the inductive method and submerged themselves in the field, letting analytic categories emerge from the data.[14]

After working with a variety of categories, the observers developed a refined coding scheme. The final coding scheme assigned categories under the following major groupings:

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13 See Joel C. Millonzi and Aliza Kolker Adelman, The Recruitment Process: The Program and Its Participants, Research Report No. 1, LaGuardia Community College, August, 1974.

14 See Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory, Chicago, Aldine Publishing Co., 1967. For examples of the grounded theory approach see also Jack D. Mezirow, Analysis and Interpretation of the Adult Basic Education Experience in the Inner City, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1971; G. Alexander Moore, Jr., Realities of the Urban Classroom, N.Y., Anchor Books, 1967.

1. Instructional Methods, Materials and Contents.
2. Motivating Devices and Failure Management Techniques.
3. Counseling Patterns.
4. Discipline Management.
5. Interface between Middle College and the College.[15]

The focused phase extended from January until April, 1975. During this phase observers, using the refined coding scheme, closely monitored formal and informal activities where Middle College students and staff were present, particularly classes. During this phase the researchers also conducted follow-up interviews with Middle College staff and with a sample of Middle College and College students. The purpose of these interviews was to compare the present attitudes and expectations of participants with those recorded during the recruitment phase. The Middle College student sample included ten each from among low, medium, and high achievers, on the basis of the first quarter's grades.[16] The reason behind this stratified sampling was to obtain a cross section of opinions about the program, and to gain insight into possible differences in attitudes among students at different achievement levels. College students, on the other hand, were selected by a random sample. Among other purposes, interview data served for internal

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[15] For a more detailed description of the categories, see Middle College of LaGuardia Community College: An Evaluation of the First Year of Operation, 1975, Part 3, Appendix A.

[16] We are indebted to Professor Jack Mezirow of Teachers College, Columbia University for suggesting this sampling procedure.

comparison with, and cross-validation of, observation data.[17]

III Middle College's Remedial Function: Findings

As mentioned, the Middle College remedial effort is a function of several program components: Middle College's small size and college setting, geared to offer students individualized attention and to motivate student interest in learning; basic skill instruction, designed to develop communication and computational skills; and academic and personal counseling, aimed especially at helping students to develop the interpersonal skills of cooperation, leadership and decision-making. Each one of these program components will be analyzed separately below.

Program Size and Setting

Size

Interview and observation data indicate, interestingly, that the Middle College's size is the program's strongest remedial component. Both students and faculty refer to size when describing desirable aspects of the program including closer relationships and the ability to meet student needs. To a significant degree, size has accomplished its aim of helping teachers to provide individualized attention to students.

Setting

While student responses indicate little awareness of the effects of college environment on learning (they see the college setting more

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17 Interview schedules and frequency distributions are reported in Middle College of LaGuardia Community College: An Evaluation of the First Year of Operation, 1975, Part 3, Appendix C and D.

in terms of desirable social or psychological effects), these responses do indicate a significant desire to attend college. Teachers point out that this desire appears to be growing among students and is, to a reasonable degree, the result of the program's college environment. There appears, then, to be some correlation between the program's setting and students' motivation, although the relationship is less clear than that of size with individualized attention.

Counseling

Counseling in Middle College occurs on two levels - individual and group. While Middle College's counseling efforts on an individual basis did appear to be developing psycho-social skills, particularly those of cooperation and decision making, the program's efforts at group counseling were only developing. During the first year, individual counseling encompassed a variety of subjects, including students' self-evaluation and grades,[18] scheduling, attendance, and personal matters. These sessions often were ones where teacher-counselors encouraged students either to cooperate in a process (regarding self-evaluation, attending and cutting) or to make their own decisions in a methodical manner (regarding scheduling and personal affairs).

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[18] As a part of the learning process, students in the Middle College were asked to evaluate and grade their own work (with teachers having the final say).

By midpoint in the year, many students felt more comfortable with the self-evaluation, grading and personal decision-making than they had at first.

Group counseling (or the promotion of interpersonal skills) has been less extensive than individual counseling. The principal forum where group counseling took place was the "House." The focus of "House" is an activity which, theoretically, the group itself designs and implements. "House" potentially is, therefore, a forum for promoting leadership, cooperation and decision-making skills.

During much of the first year, "House" activities fell short of its potential. One reason for this shortcoming was the teacher-counselors' uncertainty over their non-traditional role expectations. This philosophical dilemma centered on the issue of how directive teachers should be in "House" activities which, according to Middle College philosophy, were to emanate as much as possible from students' designs and initiative. Notwithstanding the original philosophy, "House" activities tended to flounder and disintegrate in the absence of teacher direction, and to succeed when teachers provided more structured leadership.

Basic Skill Instruction

The aim of the basic skill remedial component was to increase students' facility in communication and computational skills. Middle

College attempted to do so by infusing basic skill instruction in all academic areas, rather than segregating formal basic skill instruction in classes and in reading, writing and mathematics laboratories.

The impact of basic skills instruction, as implemented, appeared to rank behind that of size, setting and counseling. Our data indicate that teachers were generally aware of their mission to provide remedial instruction in all classes, and that their attempt to do it was sincere. With a few exceptions, however, their efforts were inconsistent.[19] On the whole, teachers emphasized communication skills (oral reading, vocabulary) more than computational skills.[20] With a few exceptions, there was also less emphasis on writing than on reading. The most consistent effort to integrate basic skills instruction into subject areas was made by a social studies instructor who regularly included structured comprehension and vocabulary sessions in his classes. In addition, career exploratory lessons, although only a fraction of the Middle College classes, seemed to lend themselves particularly well to the infusion of both communication and computational skills.

It should be noted that by the second trimester of the school year, the faculty shifted to a more systematic program of remedial

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[19] For example, one day a teacher might stress the need for students to keep a vocabulary list, but then not mention the list again for some time.

[20] This may be largely related to the fact that more English than mathematics teachers were teaching areas outside their specialty.

instruction, including a more extensive use of special remedial labs.

IV Discussion

Our discussion will center primarily on four areas: Middle College remedial philosophy; Middle College as an Institutional Entity; Instruction; and Research Methodology.

Middle College Remedial Philosophy

The Middle College plan stressed that the program was to promote "freedom and responsibility" for students. During the first year, faculty spent countless hours debating the degree of freedom and responsibility a disadvantaged student population might be expected to profitably assume. At the onset, the faculty deliberately subscribed to a liberal interpretation of student freedom and responsibility. In support of this interpretation the faculty argued, among other things, that punitive school environments had already proven ineffective with these students. In addition they suggested that it was Middle College's responsibility as an experiment to learn whether or not a liberal setting - one which extended to younger students responsibilities regarding attendance, conduct, curriculum development and grading - could improve students' learning and motivation. Finally, and, perhaps most importantly, they contended that helping students to achieve a sense of freedom and responsibility was, in the psychosocial sense, essential for the remedial process and would eventually lead to cognitive improvements. Accordingly, Middle College taking advantage of its small size, stressed counseling rather than basic skill instruction to accomplish remediation.

This remediation approach proved a challenge to both faculty and students. Faculty members frequently asked just how much direction they might provide and yet remain consistent with the plan as interpreted. Indeed, dilemmas such as this led to the frequent description of Middle College as "an alternative high school for teachers." Students, on the other hand, while appreciating the freedoms, often had difficulty assuming responsibilities. They were accustomed, as one Director's Report noted, to compulsory education, and now they were being asked to participate in an education process which was essentially voluntary.[21]

A year's research suggests two comments on this point. First, it may be useful to remember that students' assumption of adult freedom and responsibility was a long-term goal of Middle College, and that it was unrealistic to expect significant accomplishments in the first year of the program. In fact, it was probably too ambitious to expect students to reverse ten years' socialization during their initial year at Middle College. As one student remarked, "Most students come to the Middle College with the habit of cutting and failure. It's hard for them to adjust to responsibility."

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[21] See Fillmore K. Peltz, Middle College Progress Report, August, 1974 - October, 1974, mimeographed. Page 4.

The second point, which the Middle College staff seems to have already noted, is that psycho-social development has a complimentary and reciprocal relationship with basic skills instruction. The reason for this relationship is probably that there are underlying properties of basic skills instruction which are fundamental to achieving the sense of freedom and responsibility promoted by psycho-social remedial approach. These properties include such cognitive and behavioral skills as effective listening, following directions, structuring one's time and systematic problem solving. Perhaps neither the advocates of psycho-social development nor the advocates of the basic skills approach adress themselves explicitly enough to these.

Middle College as an Institutional Entity

If, however, philosophical points posed concerns during Middle College's first year, so too, did organizational dilemmas. As a joint venture between New York City's two Boards of Education, Middle College stratled the line between two formidable educational interest groups. Negotiations between the two resolved with Middle College having a director appointed by the Board of Education but who, in terms of college structure, would attend chairmen meetings chaired by LaGuardia's Dean of Faculty.* Middle College faculty were

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* The Board of Education officially referred to the project as Middle College High School.

Board of Education teachers whose assignment to the program would have the review of the appropriate college departments.*

In practical terms, this organizational structure saw the two entities welcoming each other's gestures for cooperation, but were uncertain as to how progress would be made witnin the organization. The remedial efforts provide a focus for illustration. In the social remedial model attempted, the variable of "setting" becomes important. Our field work brought out some of the influence the college's environment had in the remedial process, particularly with regard to student motivation. Yet, for this factor to be significant, the first year's data suggests that closer structural ties between college and Middle College would be needed.

It seems necessary that this integration begin with faculty. The program's plan intended that the faculties work closely with one another to coordinate a continuity of learning from tenth grade through sophomore year of college. To accomplish this, it was seen as important for the college faculty to assume informal leadership in these efforts. Despite the dual structure, there was the hope that a central authority - in body or philosophy - would emerge to orchestrate the process.

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* Early planning conversations discussed the possibility of having Middle College faculty under the full authority of departmental chairmen.

At the end of the first year, the structural integration necessary to allow "setting" to work as a remedial factor was only beginning. College and Middle College faculty, while willing to work together were uncertain as to the lines of authority and, accordingly, were hesitant to begin planning programs that may not become implemented in a somewhat ambiguous environment. This was a particular concern that college and Middle College staff had seen and were beginning to address themselves to as the first year drew to a close.

Instruction

The researchers observed a variety of teaching methods, from traditional lectures and question-and-answer sessions to group games and independent study. Researchers found that students responded most favorably to task-oriented instruction, whether in the form of written exercises, games, role playing, or arts-and-crafts projects. This form of instruction apparently appealed to students not only because it provided an intellectual focus, but also because it kept them occupied and absorbed in activity, a state in which energetic adolescents seem to be more comfortable. Task orientation, with its potential for cognitive learning, thus has the secondary benefit of quieting an active class. This confirms the views of several writers that disadvantaged

students respond better to concrete tasks than to more abstract learning styles.[22]

Individualized instruction has even more far-reaching consequences than task-orientation. As practiced in Middle College, individualized instruction in reality involves only individualized attention: assigning identical tasks to be completed individually or in small groups, with the teacher helping as needed. However, individualized instruction implies a careful prior diagnosis of individual students' needs in an area and an individually prescribed course of study. This was not commonly practiced by Middle College teachers, except for one math instructor. Individual diagnosis and prescription were particularly appropriate in light of Middle College's commitment to a policy of heterogeneous ability groupings.[23] If Middle College is to stimulate

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22 See for example, Mary Lela Sherburne, "Deprived Children and the Use of Concrete Learning Materials in Math, Science, and Social Studies" in Passow, Reaching the Disadvantaged Learner, p. 109-131; Joseph O. Loretan & Shelby Umans, Teaching The Disadvantaged: New Curriculum Approaches, New York: Teachers College Press, 1966.

23 A number of studies indicate that ability grouping accelerates the progress of low achievers while not hindering high achievers. See Walter Borg, "Ability Grouping in the Public Schools," Journal of Experimental Education, Vol. 34, No. 1, 1965; Lawrence Marascuilo and M. McSweeney, "Teaching and Minority Students" in Urban Education, June, 1972 and M. Goldberg, H. Passow and J. Justman, The Effects of Ability Grouping, Teachers College Press (New York: 1966).

each student to the best of his potential, regardless of his initial performance level, it would probably have to utilize individualized instruction more extensively.

The distinction between individualized attention and individualized instruction should not lead us to detract from the importance of the former, particularly in a remedial program. Indeed, students reported that individualized attention, significantly lacking in their previous school experience, was a major advantage of Middle College.

Research Methodology

Finally, four observations may be made with regard to research methodology. First, the fact that the participant observer staff was present in the program prior to the arrival of faculty and students seemed to minimize the discomfort and self-consciousness on the part of participants; the observers were for the most part accepted as a part of the scene. Secondly, the desire by the staff for frequent feedback from observers was notable. Observers were continually asked to share their observations with staff, requests that observers hesitated to comply with until they felt more confident in their conclusions. Thirdly, the fact that there were two professional observers who worked relatively independently from one another seemed to abate the impact of personal biases. Finally, the fact that the research strategy called for the fixing of observational categories only after an extensive period of field work, instead of at the start of the research, seemed to help the observers

to interpret the field data in accord with the perspectives of the participants rather than on the basis of preconceived notions. A better "fit" between theory and data was then made possible.

IV Summary

Using the case study approach, this paper analyzed some aspects of the Middle College program in an attempt to learn more about the dynamics of remedial education. During the first year of its operation, the program demonstrated a mixed record of successes and drawbacks, all of which are instructive for understanding the processes involved in remediation.

In the first year, the program emphasized the social approach to remediation, a dynamic approach that seemed to necessitate the use of participant-observation as an evaluative technique. It was through the use of participant-observation that we came to focus on the roles of size, setting, and structure in the remedial process.

The gains Middle College experienced in remediation derived from its warm, close student-faculty relations; from a commitment to the values of individual autonomy and freedom; and from an increased interest in education on the part of students. Many of the program's accomplishments - perhaps more than the participants realize - were

directly or indirectly the result of the program's small size, a remedial factor whose importance had initially been underestimated.

The Middle College, did, in its first year, encounter numerous difficulties. Many of these difficulties, such as the ambiguity of program goals, norms, and role expectations, are, in many ways attributable to the program's newness. Because of the program's newness, however, was was difficult to distinguish short-term difficulties from structural shortcomings inherent in the program's view of remediation - a view which, at the time of our research was yet to be fully implemented.

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